

J e a n V a l j e a n
A Les Miserables Character Evaluation

Jean Valjean possesses the dignity and moral certitude of an Atticus Finch, and his determination to survive concurrently when possessing a consciousness haunted by the past is akin to an Ari Ben Canaan². His is a character who was condemned by society, and that condemnation was corrupting. The journey of Jean Valjean is frequently framed as one of redemption, often to the exclusion of any other theme. Yet this understates the complexity of his experience. While Victor Hugo clearly demonstrates the depth of Valjean's internal struggles, the character operates within the confines of society's restrictions while striving for redemption. In spite of the overt ideological themes, however, his crime was less about sin and more a violation of the laws of humanity. Rather than be a story of redemption, Les Miserables is about a man for whom the process of achieving redemption is rooted in his inability to forgive himself. One is mistaken for the other as he strives to put his conscience to rest.

Organizational statement

Clarity is necessary in order to make the case against the redemption perspective. This paper will first review Jean Valjean's life as the mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer through to his death, focusing on the redemptive characterizations witnessed therein. It will be followed by earlier transformative moments in his life which make, on the whole, the redemptive argument problematic. Organized thematically rather than chronically, this is not intended to present a comprehensive biography of the man, but rather will address some key moments relevant to the thesis.

A decade toward redemption

Having been released from prison in 1815, Jean Valjean reemerges to a post-Napoleonic world which is hostile toward convicts. His yellowed passport is like a badge of shame, denoting for everyone his criminal past. Completely cut off from his past life, he is truly on his own. The only man who offers him assistance is Bishop Myriel. That evening, in spite of his generosity, Valjean steals from the Bishop and is detained by soldiers thereafter. However, rather than tell the guards of the events which would have returned him to the galleys, the Bishop informs them that Valjean was his guest and gave his wares as a gift. The Bishop's motive is certain. Handing him his knapsack and adding a pair of silver candlesticks, he says:

“Forget not, never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man. . . . Jean Valjean, my brother: you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you. I am withdrawing it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I am giving it to God!”³

With these words Jean Valjean sets off from Digne, perplexed, lost in thought and consumed by his conscience. The world around him melts away from conscious awareness as he wrestles with the bishop's affect on him. Along the way, he steps on the coin of Petit Gervais, initiating a sequence of events which result in the boy losing his coin and Jean Valjean pondering the extent to which he may have been complicit in the event. Burdened by this, he is seen at three in the morning in remorseful prayer outside the Bishop's home. From this point forward, he lives his life in steady alignment with the precepts of faith and – aside from living under an assumed identity – with that of society's laws.

Jean Valjean is clearly a good man. His goodness is instinctive, omnipresent and occurs without consideration for reward nor, for that matter, of any repercussions or unintended consequences. Examples of this are replete throughout the text: When first arriving at Montreuil-sur-Mer he rescues two children of the police chief from a fire, resulting in the officer not checking his papers; when a heavy cart rolls upon and pins Fauchelevent, Valjean saved him – even though this risked exposing his identity to Inspector Javert – and then followed this

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² Atticus Fitch was the lead character in To Kill A Mockingbird (1960) by Harper Lee, while Ari Ben Canaan is the lead character in Exodus (1958) by Leon Uris.

³ Les Miserables by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 63

with an act of generosity by finding the now-handicapped Fauchelevent employment in a Paris convent as a gardener; as mayor, he directed much of his own fortune to support the hospital, schools and churches; on the prison ship Orion he risks his own life to rescue a sailor, after which he himself is presumed dead; at the barricades he does not fight, and when asked to take up arms he utilizes his marksmanship to warn rather than kill French soldiers, and; when given control of the captured Inspector Javert, Jean Valjean chooses to release him, firing a shot in the air so as to make people think he was dead. That this man condemned by society is actually creating a positive ripple of change in his community is unquestionable. However, does this represent redemptive action? Are these good deeds pursued to achieve an agenda? There is no evidence to support this. Rather, he is acting naturally. He is acting morally. He is behaving as good people generally do.

There are really only two events in which Jean Valjean is truly confronted with moments which reveal his thoughts in a redemptive light: the Champmatheau case, and when reflecting upon his complex rivalry with Marius for Cosette's affection. These offer different levels emotionally on the same theme. Herein lay the arguments which are at the foundation of any assertion that he is a redeemed character, and as such they must be addressed separately and comprehensively.

A fellow named Champmatheau is mistaken for Jean Valjean and is on trial. When word of this reaches Valjean, then the mayor, he has an opportunity to finally escape the burden of his name. All he has to do is nothing. Inspector Javert said the defendant's ignorance was no mask for the other evidence against him. Valjean ponders this, and just as he seems to decide on a course of action his conscience starts to pester him. How can he allow another to be punished for his crimes? Valjean still has the Bishop's candlesticks and the coin taken from the young chimneysweep, the former as a reminder of his inspiration and the latter because he still sought to return it even years later. This internal dilemma was all-encompassing.

The two ideas which had been hitherto the double rule of his life: to conceal his name and to sanctify his soul. For the first time, they appeared to him absolutely distinct, and he saw the difference which separated them. He recognized that one of these ideas was necessarily good, while the other might become evil; the former was devotion, and that the latter was selfishness; that the one said 'neighbor', and that the other said: 'me'; that the one came from the light and the other from the night.⁴

He resolves to turn himself in; only in this manner would his soul be secure. But then he remembers Fantine, a woman whom he was nursing back to health and whom he had promised to retrieve her young daughter Cosette.⁵ What would become of them should he be returned to the galleys? This presented another crisis. She would be imprisoned and innocent Cosette would be abandoned. While his ego could tolerate imprisonment to save his soul, he believes that helping other is the highest order of goodness. He tries to bargain with God, pointing to the good he had done and how this want for helping another should mitigate any condemnation. His conscience is in turmoil, but in the final analysis he chooses to leave it in the hands of fate. Fate, after all, is the direction preordained by Providence. He resolves to make an effort to get to the trial, and if fate should intervene and impede his path, then so be it. As it so happens, on a few occasions during his journey it appeared as if some impediment to his travels might occur, only to have an opportunity to continue his travels present itself. Each time he would be forced to make decisions as to whether to continue his journey or not, and by the time he arrives at the courthouse there was no hesitation in his mind as to what God felt was necessary. In his view, all was governed by fate, and fate is the determination of Providence. Carrying this Aristotelian syllogism one step further, therefor, he viewed this in a redemptive light as he assumed God was testing him to challenge his fate.

His dealings with Marius present a different avenue through which he would be forced to confront his inner-demons, but in a manner starkly different from the aforementioned. Marius is a rival for Cosette's affection and loyalty. Jean Valjean, fearing losing the only figure who has given his life meaning and definition, realizes that to do so he would become obsolete. She was the reason why he has not given himself up to the law. She is the reason why he feels rejuvenated and happy. Rather than view Cosette as an unrelated orphan he took in, he views her in a manner akin to a niece, daughter, or granddaughter. What started as a promise to Fantine evolved into the only family he has.

Does this inability to appreciate and welcome Marius reveal a source of emotion which cannot be redeemed without letting Cosette go? His hesitation at first was fear that Marius might jeopardize his anonymity, yet this grew into fear of losing Cosette emotionally and affectionately. If love is Divine, does Valjean sin by

⁴ *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 151

⁵ Jean Valjean feels a degree of responsibility for the improvised situation Fantine is in, and sees her as a kindred spirit.

prohibiting it? Is his self-sacrifice following his eventual consent a form of redemption in and upon itself, in so much as it reflects the ultimate putting of another's happiness ahead of his own. Following the wedding, Valjean strove to put distance between she and himself, including restricting the time they are together and having her call him by a different name. While Marius is encouraging some of this due to his knowledge of Valjean's having been a convict, Valjean himself is purposely creating pain for he and Cosette both, although this serves to eventually push her more toward Marius while leaving Valjean desolate and, ultimately, alone.

Several statements in the latter chapters point toward a possible inferiority complex, but this conclusion would come from too literal an interpretation of the book. When Jean Valjean says to Marius "...in order that I may respect myself, I must be despised" and "it is by degrading myself in your eyes that I elevate myself in my own" he is reflecting an inner struggle wherein taking responsibility is the method though which he feels redemption may be achieved.⁶ This is not so much self-loathing, but rather he rejects kindness and choses to live in self-pity, believing he still must make amends in order to be accepted by God.

Is it really redemption?

It is easy to take for granted the redemptive tendencies exhibited by Jean Valjean, thereby ascribing that to be the main thrust of his own journey. Certainly he is concerned about his soul and his relationship with his God. However, redemption implies a sin or debauchery which set in motion certain events; that is, some event of sufficient magnitude and villainy to jeopardize ones soul. Yet it is open to interpretation as to whether these events suffice. To fully explore this matter, it becomes necessary to reexamine the very origins of the events for which society condemned him, specifically: the circumstances of his arrest and the incident involving Petit Gervais. These are the charges levied against Champmathieu⁷, events rooted at the foundation of Valjean's self-loathing. The events' surrounding the theft from the Bishop is a bit more nebulous and deserved its' own treatment afterward.

This treatment should be prefaced with what is understood about his background. Jean Valjean's father was a pruner and his mother the caregiver of their children in the French village of Brie. These were acceptable occupations in their day, particularly for poor families in the Faverolles region. Young Valjean was orphaned at a young age when his father fell from a tree and his mother died of milk sickness. Consequentially, he would be taken in and raised by his widowed sister, alongside her seven young children. Here he worked as a laborer and pruner to assist his family without hesitation. In the climate of starvation the children would occasionally sneak milk from a neighbor; had she known, their mother – Jean Valjean's sister – would have been furious, but upon learning of this he, in spite of his poverty, paid Marie Claude for the milk. This was about doing what was right. There is no hint of criminality in young Valjean nor in those who influenced him. The winter of 1795 proved particularly tough as resources grew increasingly scarce. It is against this backdrop he attempted to steal a loaf of bread at night from a baker whose shop was full of bread. He did this to feed his starving family. As punishment for this crime, he is sentenced to five years in prison in the Bagne in Toulon. At the time of his incarceration "Then sobbing as he was, he raised his right hand and lowered it seven times, as if he was touching seven heads of unequal height, and at this gesture one could only guess that whatever he had done, had been to feed and clothe seven little children."⁸ His crime was one of altruism. He sought to put food in the mouths of starving youth. The manner in which he sought to rectify his noble intentions directly challenged the rules of society.

Bridging the nineteen years between his arrest and the next two key moments is a difficult time in prison. His four escape attempts and related resistance to re-arrest added an additional fourteen years to his original five year sentence. Prison life was harsh. He arrived with a chain around his neck. He was stripped of his identity and individualism, instead assigned the number 24,601. It was strenuous manual labor. He was surrounded by hardened criminals, and while there may have emerged a fraternity wherein they assisted one another from time to time, they nevertheless looked after their own interests.

In such a climate, who one once was is strangled out of them. Honor, dignity and faith are exhausted; only despair remains. What remains is a product of this harsh environment. "Jean Valjean entered the galleys sobbing and shuddering; he went out hardened; he entered in despair: he went out sullen."⁹ This will create

⁶ Both quotes from *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 779

⁷ *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 172

⁸ *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 49

⁹ *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 61

criminality! He grew disdainful of both humanity and of Providence for allowing such injustice to occur. Out of such a place walked a transformed Jean Valjean.

Upon leaving the bishop's home, "there came over him [Jean Valjean], at times, a strange relenting which he struggled with, and to which he opposed the hardening of his past twenty years.¹⁰" He recalled long-lost memories of his childhood and family. Deep in this contemplative thought and with his conscience in inner-turmoil, he largely disengaged from the events around him. It is here when a twelve year old chimneysweep walks by, losing a forty sou coin which Jean Valjean steps on. It is here where two distinct interpretations of the story are not uncommon.

The first interpretation asserts the convict purposely stepped on the coin and then feigned ignorance so as to scare the boy away and with the motive of stealing the money. There is no direct evidence to support this interpretation. Jean Valjean appeared morose, completely separated from the events around him. He did not understand Petit Gervais's pleading for the coin's return, as he was unaware he was stepping on it. Having reached the limits of tolerance as this boy's plea interrupted his contemplation, he frightened the boy, who left sobbing. A more plausible explanation is that his stepping on the coin was an accident. When he later saw the coin beneath his foot, he was remorseful at this unintentional act. He took time to process this moment, and what it means in relation to the events of a half hour earlier with the boy. He sought out Petit Gervais, calling his name across the desolate countryside. He asked a priest who was passing through whether he had seen the boy, and donated coins to the poor both before and after presenting his inquiry to the priest. What the motivation would be for a poor convict to donate in such circumstances is difficult to ascertain, and his stated want to return to prison is prompted by his belief that life outside prison is more unpredictable and dangerous than life inside would be. Inside, at least, he was fed and could predict what each day would be like.

To what extent does this scene contribute to the question of redemption? This depends on whether one may separate out evil intentions from instinctive responses which are conditioned through life experiences. Could a person indeed be evil if their intention or motive at the time of the crime is otherwise, or even null? Victor Hugo himself reiterates that it is not in Jean Valjean's nature to be evil.

He could not have explained it, surely; it was the final effect, the final effort of the evil thoughts he had brought from the galleys, a remnant of impulse . . . It was not he who had stolen, it was the beast which, from habit and instinct, had stupidly set its foot upon that money, while the intellect was struggling in the midst of so many new and unknown influences.¹¹

Jean Valjean was not purposely making an effort to steal the coin. For, as Hugo writes, "In stealing this money from that child, he had done a thing of which he was no longer capable."¹²

Is redemption quantifiable when the initial crime is one of altruism, and the two subsequent crimes were due to characteristics carved into him during nineteen years of imprisonment? These key moments are those for which he was condemned by the law and by himself. And he is aware of what was taken from him.

At the very moment when he exclaimed: "what a wretch I am?" he saw himself as he was, and was already so far separated from himself that he was only a phantom, and that he had there before him, in flesh and bone with his stick in his hand, his smooch on his back, his knapsack filled with stolen articles on his shoulders, with his stern and gloomy face, and his thoughts full of abominable projects, the hideous galley slave Jean Valjean.¹³

The entire concept of redemption is predicated upon the notion that a person recognizes their inner wickedness and seeks to reform themselves while making amends for their crimes. Badness is all they are, and so redemption is about a truly authentic change rather than just a reclaiming of their original benevolent nature. Yet Jean Valjean is not an evil man. Rather, he will spend much of the book striving to reclaim the man who it was his birthright to be, yet which the laws of society stole from him.

Less clear is any underlying theme or motivation associated with his stealing of silver from the Bishop, which occurred between the two aforementioned events. The theft from Bishop Myriel is his first direct act of criminality as an intrinsically wicked individual. After half a lifetime of cruelty and being surrounded by

¹⁰ *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 63

¹¹ *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 67

¹² *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 68

¹³ *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 68

hardened criminals, the bishop offers gestures of kindness by providing a roof for shelter, a mattress to rest on, and a meal. Having only recently been released from prison and shunned by polite French society, Jean Valjean was, mentally, still in survival-mode. He knew not whom he could trust and was recoiling away from the harsh realities of being a convict in a land which eschews convicts. Ill at ease by the comfort he unexpectedly found himself in, he ruminated on six silver plates spied in an adjoining room. They were worth a fair amount of money, funds which could help him get through the coming months.

Even here the reader is reminded of this man's transformation due to his prison experiences. "In the course of nineteen years, Jean Valjean, the inoffensive pruner of Faverolles, the terrible galley slave of Toulon, had become capable, thanks to the training he had received in the galleys, of two species of crime; first, a sudden, unpremeditated action, full of rashness, all instinct, a sort of reprisal for the wrong he had suffered; secondly, a serious, premeditated act, discussed by his conscience, and pondered over with false ideas which such a fate will give."¹⁴ This reference to "false ideas" is intriguing and bears exploration. Such false ideas may represent a complete paradigm shift in how he views the world and how he perceives that the world views him. His entire worldview is filtered through the lens of his being branded a criminal. At Toulon, all which was good in him had been stripped away. This theft from the Bishop was in accordance with his worldview, and his hesitation demonstrates he was committing a crime which was familiar to him solely due to a long association with those who have spoken of their exploits.¹⁵ However, as counterpoint, the text emphasizes the contemplative nature of this theft. He took time in reflecting upon the room and the symbolism associated with the Bishop.

A Catch 22?

Jean Valjean's personal approach to meeting his needs is furthermore revealing. While in prison he came to believe that he was wronged from two corners: God and society; the former which assigned him this fate, and the latter which disproportionally punished him, albeit with God's tacit consent through fate. Jean Valjean is concerned about his soul. On matters of an ideological nature he strove to do what was necessary to live a morally good life, as the Champmathieu case illustrates. Regarding society, however, his approach is more tenuous. Were it just he then a return to the Galley's would have been acceptable. But he rarely walked alone. He built a works factory, employed many and paid his workers well. He was a beloved mayor. He protected and provided for Cosette. He donated to the poor while in Paris. None of this would have been possible had he been in prison. In order to do good he had to live in obscurity, shielded by an alias and protected by that alias's good reputation. In other words, doing good to win the favor of his God necessitated his continued breaking of society's laws by not announcing his criminal history as the law demanded. That society would condemn him, he interpreted, was evidence of God's discontent in him.

Conclusion

Can an assertion of redemption work in a society which does not believe in reform? Its entire system is predicated around emphasizing punishment rather than rehabilitation. Can an assertion of redemption work in a climate wherein his God is silent, leaving Jean Valjean solely to interpret how his actions are being viewed by the Divine? The very concept of redemption is loaded with theological implications. Yet there is no evidence of a religious deity having forsaken Jean Valjean. While his crime was one of a man victimizing another through theft, the nature of that victimization was altruistic in nature. He stole the bread to feed his starving nieces and nephews. It was a crime built on the foundation of nobility and honor. Nevertheless, as an academic exercise one must distinguish between the laws of society and the laws of faith. Redemption is an ideological construct, one not compatible with nineteenth century French society. Consequentially, there is a burden of proof on those who assert the figure of Jean Valjean is a redemptive figure. While superficially this may appear to be the case, there exist layers of analysis which need to be exhausted and addressed before this assertion may be made with confidence.

¹⁴ Les Misérables by Victor Hugo, 1862, Barnes and Noble Classics, New York, isbn.978-1-59308-066-2, page 54

¹⁵ Unlike in the 1998 film, please note that in the original text Jean Valjean does not strike the bishop. The bishop slept through the theft.

Name: _____

Class: _____ Date: _____

Supplemental discussion prompts – Jean Valjean

This paper is purposely designed to have a provocative thesis, one which may be little addressed nor appreciated in some classrooms or discourse communities surrounding Les Miserables, yet one which remains deeply intrinsic to the storyline and characters.

It is hoped that the ideas in this essay serve as a starting point for further discussion among students, in classrooms and between anyone who appreciates Victor Hugo's work. To that end, the following discussion prompts are offered for contemplation for you to deliberate with others. While I will sadly not be within earshot to listen in on your brilliance, to engage in these and related questions critically and philosophically will bring honor to yourself and the book. Have fun.

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the author's (John Cornet) thesis that the theme of redemption is problematic in relation to Jean Valjean? Consider what you feel to be the major points and any particular weaknesses in the argument.
2. To what extent may redemption be possible in a society which shuns both reform and rehabilitation?
3. Identify the extent to which human law was interpreted and expressed in this society as an extension of God's law.
4. Under what circumstances does Jean Valjean step out from the comfort of his anonymity (or, his hiding in plain sight as he so often did) and risk the truth of his background becoming known? In your answer consider examples from his time as mayor, in the convent and also in Paris before, during and after the barricade. What commonalities of thought or behavior are noticed?
5. Which has more sway over Jean Valjean's behavior – his sense of responsibility or concerns for redemption? Are these two mutually exclusive?
6. What is Jean Valjean's source of strength? In your answer, be sure to distinguish between actual sources or strength and his perception of sources of strength.
7. What precisely do the candlesticks represent? (Note: saying "the Bishop" is too simplistic an answer; use your answer as an exploration of the question, rather than just seeking a short answer response)
8. Explain the relationship between Jean Valjean and Inspector Javert, contrasting how these men view one another at different stages of the pursuit.
9. Jean Valjean's behavior – truthful, merciful, benevolent – became the direct influence bearing upon Javert's inner-crisis, which in turn led to his suicide. How would Valjean respond had he known this? What type of dilemmas would such knowledge have created, and how would he have reconciled them alongside the other things he was anguishing over?